

## RECEPTIVE PUBLICS

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It is widely accepted that public discourse as we know it is less than ideal from an epistemological point of view. In this paper, we develop an underappreciated aspect of the trouble with public discourse: what we call *the Listening Problem*. The listening problem is the problem that public discourse has in giving appropriate uptake and reception to ideas and concepts from oppressed groups. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, we develop an institutional response to the listening problem: the establishment of what we call *Receptive Publics*, discursive spaces designed to improve listening skills and to give space for counterhegemonic ideas.

**I**N recent years—and alongside the rise of social media—there has been increasing concern about the state of public discourse. One very visible, and oft-discussed, instance is what has come to be called *cancel culture*. Commentators have raised concerns about people being wrongfully scapegoated, often using striking examples of people suffering high social costs for their speech to motivate sweeping claims about the prevalence of self-censorship across society.

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In his work on public shaming, the writer Jon Ronson has placed considerable weight on anecdotal evidence, such as the story of Justine Sacco, an American PR executive who tweeted a joke about AIDS to her 175 followers before boarding a flight to South Africa, and was unemployed and at the centre of a twitterstorm by the time she landed (see Ronson 2015a; 2015b). Increasingly, use of the term ‘cancel culture’ triggers the idea that we live in a wide-spread culture of suspicion, in which speech by even the ‘average’ person must be carefully formulated to avoid perceived norm-breaking.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not cancel culture exists, and whether or not it is a problem, is a contentious issue. Our intention is not to take a stance within this debate. Instead, we want to highlight an issue with the typical framing of the debate, and show how this same framing issue is present in much of both the general and academic discussion about the state of public discourse. The issue is erroneously framing public discourse solely in terms of speech. Concerns about cancel culture are concerns about *what you are allowed to say* (for some suitable value of ‘allowed’), and a view about the issue of cancel culture is a view about what kinds of speech are within and outwith the bounds of speech norms, and what kinds of social responses are appropriate for norm violations. This might be an issue that it is important to have an opinion on, but presenting cancel culture and issues of what can be said as the central problem of public discourse distorts our understanding. A good conversation—public or otherwise—is a joint activity, which requires both appropriate speech, and productive listening.

Instead of thinking just about *speech*, we think that it is important to reframe debates about public discourse in a way that pays more attention to *listening*. A combination of the democratising effects of internet communication and general progressive sentiment has meant that oppressed groups are increasingly able to get a toehold in public discourse to describe and explain the political problems which they face. These claims often run contrary to hegemonic ideas, and are expressed in specialised terminology which faces a problem of uptake when it comes to the wider public.

We think that this is the real root of the (perceived) problem of cancel culture, but that it also points to a wider problem for democratic societies, which we shall call *the listening problem*.<sup>3</sup> The listening problem is this: when public discourse

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2. These associations with ‘cancel culture’ are something of a new development. Meredith Clark (2020) shows how a combination of appropriation and weaponisation led to ‘cancelling’ shifting from its original meaning in African American Vernacular English—referring to the withdrawal of support from a person—to its current overlapping set of associations. Insofar as we can recover a stable meaning for ‘cancelling’ post appropriation, it refers to the phenomenon of people facing significant social costs for speech which is perceived to flout social norms. It is in this sense which we will use the term.

3. Although listening connotes the auditory modality and a response to an assertion, we intend it to pick out a general receptive response which might occur in response to any com-

and its supporting institutions—whether these be the public square, newspaper columns, call-in radio shows, or social media platforms—are organised around the perspectives and interests of dominant and majority groups, it is ill-suited to giving appropriate uptake to the ideas and concepts of marginalised and minority groups. Unlike the individualistic focus of the cancel culture framing, the listening problem is a problem about the institutional management of contentious speech.<sup>4</sup> How can those responsible for the creation, shaping and maintenance of our contemporary epistemic-cum-political institutions better mediate the relation between privileged and marginalised groups?

The history of liberation movements suggests the beginnings of an answer. We can find many examples of groups gathering for the express purpose of listening to ideas about oppression which they don't experience. Plausibly part of the purpose of Olaudah Equiano's five-year (1789–94) tour of his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* (Bugg 2006) was to create a literary public of white British people who were capable of understanding the moral arguments against the slave trade. Through the late 19th and early 20th century, anti-imperial discourse from the British colonies was received by sympathetic groups in the metropole through a process of *reverse tutelage* (Gopal 2019). In the early 1970s, groups of men in the United States organised themselves into consciousness-raising groups that discussed feminism, and their role in the oppression of women, under the heading of 'men's liberation' (Farrell 1972; Messner 1998; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz 2015).<sup>5</sup> And in *#Hashtag Activism*, Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles discuss how marginalised communities have used hashtags as a tool for consolidating their ideas in a way which allies can easily find and spread (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles 2020).

Taken together these examples point toward an undertheorised—but vital—element of the public sphere: groups which gather together to listen to and understand people with different ideas to them; what we will call a *receptive public*. Our goal in this paper is to try to understand the epistemic and political dynamics involved in groups organised around public listening, and to argue that receptive publics are an important intentional resource for deliberative democracy. Above, we speculated that the cause of (perceptions of) cancel cul-

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municative act in any modality (written, spoken, signed). These contributions need not be passive. Asking clarificatory questions, rephrasing, summarising, and drawing implied inferences are receptive contributions which we might think of as part of listening in a broad sense.

4. This is not to say that there is not space for individual responses to the listening problem. On the benefits and costs of *lurking* in counterpublic spaces, see (Frost-Arnold 2023: C5; Crawford 2011).

5. These groups are a cautionary tale: although some developed into profeminist groups that campaigned against violence against women (Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz 2015: C2) others were brought into the anti-feminist 'Men's rights' movement (Messner 1998). In our terms below, we might suggest that in this case a nascent receptive public, transformed into a false counterpublic that was invested in presenting masculinity as an oppressed identity.

ture might be that oppressed groups are increasingly gaining a toehold in public discourse. It might seem counterintuitive, then, to suggest that creating greater audiences for such discourse can also reduce (perceptions of) cancel culture. However, we think the issue is that counterhegemonic ideas are gaining visibility (within, but also beyond, receptive publics) faster than receptive publics are being established. Our proposal is that fostering more receptive publics might facilitate productive engagement with, as opposed to reflexive opposition to, counterhegemonic ideas.

To understand the dynamics of these spaces, we will draw both on the public sphere tradition in political theory, and on analytic social epistemology. We will argue that Nancy Fraser's arguments for the importance of subaltern counterpublics for the articulation and dissemination of the knowledge possessed by marginalised groups point toward a corresponding role for receptive publics to take up those ideas and help amplify them in the wider public sphere. And we will argue that work in analytic social epistemology can help us to understand the epistemic barriers to such uptake. Indirectly, we also aim to advocate for public listening as an important topic for theorists of deliberative democracy and social epistemology.

The plan is as follows. In the first section we will introduce what we call *the listening problem*, and unpack three specific barriers to learning about counterhegemonic ideas: the social costs of speech (discussed by the public under the term 'cancel culture'), unequal distribution of epistemic labour, and antagonistic relationships. We think that each of these barriers is both a sign of, and also helps to perpetuate, the listening problem. In the second section we turn to the public sphere tradition, suggesting that arguments for the importance of counterpublics can be extended to demonstrate the need for receptive publics. In the third section, we present an account of what receptive publics are, and how they provide an institutional solution to the listening problem. In the fourth section, we make some preliminary remarks about how to build and support receptive publics, and offer a couple of suggestions about future directions for research.

## 1. The Listening Problem

The ideal of open and egalitarian public discourse assumes frictionless communication and an epistemically virtuous audience for public speech. But actual public discourse falls considerably short of this ideal, especially when it comes to speech from and/or about oppressed groups. This is what we call the listening problem:

Public discourse suffers from the listening problem when it is organised around the perspectives and interests of a dominant group in a way that leaves participants ill-equipped to give appropriate uptake to counter-hegemonic ideas, particularly when these ideas are expressed by people who are not a part of the dominant group.

As things stand, public discourse doesn't foster listening in general—instead prioritising speech—and we are often especially bad at listening to attempts to repair or improve this inadequate discursive situation. Participants in public discourse also have particular deficiencies, such as credibility deficits and hermeneutic marginalisation, with regard to listening to oppressed people, regardless of the content of what they say (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2014). These weaknesses and deficiencies are certainly connected to, and compounded by, the phenomenon that we're concerned with. But when we talk about the listening problem for public discourse, we specifically mean the failure to foster the uptake of counterhegemonic ideas formulated in counterpublics. This problem is further compounded by *meta-ignorance* about the very existence of the listening problem, which this paper aims to alleviate.

We think that it is helpful to think about the barriers to effective public listening by analogy to the barriers to other kinds of learning. Successful learning in any field, practical or theoretical, requires i) an environment in which learners can comfortably make mistakes, ii) an expectation on the part of the learner that they will have to put in considerable work, and iii) co-operation between the learner and suitable experts in the field. In mainstream public discourse about counterhegemonic ideas, we often find barriers to all three conditions. Learners perceive imperfect speech to have very high costs, they don't have appropriate expectations about the amount of effort which they will need to invest, and antagonism between them and members of oppressed groups who are closer to the production of counter-hegemonic ideas undermines co-operation between learners and experts.

This section will focus on each of these barriers in turn. We will start with perceived high social costs as this is often the problem most visible to people who are not saliently oppressed, and then go on to discuss unequal distribution of epistemic labour, and antagonism. To be clear: we don't think these are the only barriers to learning and listening. Other barriers include a general lack of practice at listening (which isn't prioritised in public discourse), as well as being (consciously or not) materially and psychologically invested in remaining ignorant of oppression that one doesn't experience and may benefit from. Nevertheless, tackling these three problems is important.

### 1.1. *Social Costs*

The first barrier to learning about counterhegemonic ideas is the perception of high *social costs*. In the introduction, we connected social costs with (controversial) anxieties about ‘cancel culture’. Here we will explain how such anxieties are indicative of (and themselves present) barriers to listening.

People increasingly express worries about contributing to discussions on contentious topics, particularly about oppression that they don’t experience. They are anxious about backlash for misstepping or saying something that is unwittingly offensive. Whether or not some of these worries are overblown, given the principle of charity, there is some reason to think that there’s genuine anxiety or ‘psychic pain’ at the root of these concerns (Goldberg 2021). People who have faced little to no oppression may be most likely to express such worries, as encountering serious social costs for speech may be a new or infrequent experience for those people, and one which they are not yet skilled at handling.

These concerns may preclude some people from engaging receptively (i.e., listening) as well as from speaking. To effectively listen to the experiences of another group is not a merely passive experience (Notess 2019; and see footnotes 2 and 3): it involves shifting between different processing listening routes, asking clarificatory questions, raising background issues, restating claims, and drawing relevant inferences from what has been said. The importance of active listening is highlighted both by sociolinguists, who work on the category of *epistemics* which function as a form of ‘backchannel’ communication that conveys information about comprehension and uptake of ideas (Nagel 2019), and by writers in the Black Feminist tradition (see Collins’s discussion of the relation between call and response music and the epistemic dynamics of Black discourse [Collins 2009: 264]). The fear of the social costs of getting things wrong—which is after all, an integral part of any learning process—prevents some people from fully, receptively engaging in discussions about oppression which they don’t experience.

From the point of view of the saliently oppressed person this reluctance can look like laziness. After all, the costs of being mocked for not realising that something was racist are much lower than the costs of actually facing racist oppression every day. This explanation has some truth to it, but we think it’s helpful to think of the social costs of engaging in discussions about oppression one doesn’t experience in terms of *unmanaged epistemic friction*.

José Medina (2012) introduces the notion of ‘epistemic friction’ to describe the encounter between differing viewpoints, or sets of values in discourse. Such situations can be very jarring—just as physical friction is. But if handled properly, it can be productive—just as physical friction can produce heat, epistemic friction can produce understanding. If friction is left unmanaged (as it often is in

online spaces), it can take a psychological toll, and this often results in negative epistemic outcomes. For example, some people double down on deeply-held beliefs they (know they) don't have sufficient evidence for, as an identity-protecting defence mechanism (Kahan 2016; 2017; Lewandowsky 2021), and others avoid engaging with certain topics, platforms, or groups, or disengage from (especially online) debate altogether (Syvertsen 2020). The amount of epistemic friction associated with a topic is not fixed, and can vary depending on the social context of discourse. We suggest that social media's combination of context-poor communication (Nguyen 2021), publicity, and optimisation for highly-emotive speech (Merrill & Omerus 2021) means that it can act as a force multiplier for epistemic friction.

So far in this section we've highlighted people who experience little to no oppression as being particularly conscious of, and so hindered by, the potential social costs of engaging in discussions about the oppression others experience. But it's worth pointing out the effects on people who experience multiple forms of oppression too. Those who experience multiple intersecting forms of oppression are often exposed to a high level of epistemic friction online in the form of (e.g.) racism, sexism, and ableism in response to their speech, as well as in the general failure of uptake and understanding of their experience (see Sobande 2020). Since they already face problems for speech even about non-contentious topics, they may—for different reasons than those who experience little to no oppression—be reluctant to engage in discussions about forms of oppression that they don't experience—or even about forms of oppression that they do. In multiple groups then, high social costs (whether perceived or actual), and a consequent unwillingness to experiment, create barriers to engaging in discussions about oppression, and listening to minority groups talk about social problems.

### ***1.2. Unequal Distribution of Epistemic Labour***

The second barrier to learning about counter-hegemonic ideas is the unequal distribution of epistemic labour in public discourse, and is due to skewed expectations about the work involved in good listening. Learners frequently underestimate what communicative labour is required, whose responsibility it is to provide this labour, and who deserves credit for it (see McKinney 2015). This barrier is most easily visible from the perspective of the saliently oppressed.

Those who experience little to no oppression typically have the luxury of engaging in discourse in ways that are comfortable to them. Those who experience significant oppression are expected to communicate in these same ways that are familiar to, and mandated by, the dominant groups, even if they are unfamiliar to them. They are expected to moderate their tone and language and to adopt

dominant conversational patterns and etiquette (Lorde 1984; Fraser 1990; 63–64) in order to appear less ‘threatening’ or ‘unprofessional’. The saliently oppressed are often faced with “destructive reactions” when they participate in discourse (cf. Berenstain 2016). They may face “default scepticism” (Berenstain 2016) and need to truncate their message to make it more palatable (Dotson 2011), meaning that even successful communication is only partially so. In effect, they will need to manage the epistemic friction and the psychological conflict which their audiences experience when encountering unfamiliar and challenging ideas.

Berenstain argues that attempting to highlight these facts, or change them, involves large amounts of epistemic labour (Berenstain 2016). Not only does oppression mean adapting to the style and expectations of the dominant group, it also means needing to motivate and introduce the changes that make the conversation more epistemically just and productive (see McKinney 2015: C2). Oppression has an epistemic dimension: saliently oppressed people need to do extra work because they are well-positioned to explain oppression to the oppressor, and the oppressor will not put in the work to accommodate these explanations. When the saliently oppressed do successfully explain an aspect of their oppression to someone who doesn’t experience it, credit for this intellectual achievement will often accrue to the person who learned something new, rather than to the person who worked to make this knowledge available and palatable.

Given the amount of labour which needs to be invested into communication by oppressed people to facilitate effective listening, and the fact that this labour is frequently effaced and unacknowledged, it may often be reasonable for them to simply refuse to engage (see the introduction to Reni Eddo-Lodge’s *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, 2018). Good listening takes work, and when the expectations around that work are unreasonable, and the work is not recognised, let alone appreciated, it will not be reasonable to put the effort in.

We think that awareness of this problem is why many people (particularly those who face multiple forms of oppression) are resistant to framings of cancel culture which only acknowledge high social costs for people who don’t experience salient oppression. Once the disproportionate epistemic (and social) labour demanded of those who face salient oppression is recognised, the demand for those who don’t to commit to additional social (and epistemic) labour can be seen as a reasonable request for fairer redistribution. Lack of awareness of this problem is also a barrier to engagement for people who aren’t saliently oppressed. They may disengage after putting in the level of effort they are accustomed to, and so fail to achieve deeper understanding of the issues, leaving them ignorant and feeling threatened.



### 1.3. *Antagonistic Relationships*

The third barrier to learning about counter-hegemonic ideas is antagonistic communication. Listening requires co-operation, which is undermined by antagonistic relationships and attitudes. This is something that should, in theory, be visible from a wide range of perspectives.

Antagonistic relationships are poison to successful communication. At a basic level, communication is a co-operative activity that requires reciprocity in what beliefs are shared, and what questions are being investigated, and a willingness to adjust to differences in conceptual scheme (Stalnaker 1984). Hostility and identity-protective reasoning can prevent important ideas from receiving uptake, and the kinds of shifts of hermeneutic resources required to give uptake to counterhegemonic ideas requires a kind of mutual trust which is undermined by antagonism. In an environment of antagonism it may be impossible for those who face salient oppression to effectively communicate, let alone engage in the kind of sympathetic back-and-forth required by effective listening on contentious topics.

Adversariality is not per se problematic (Mouffe 2000; Dutilh Novaes 2021), and attempts to eliminate it can contribute to further marginalisation (Henning 2021). Yet, all too often discourse about the experiences of marginalised people is characterised by game playing and deliberate obtuseness—features of traditional antagonistic, or agonistic, game playing, as María Lugones observes (1987).

There are various available techniques to dismiss terms which don't fit into the hegemonic conceptual scheme. Terms associated with conceptual innovations can be rejected as nonsense (what Matthew Cull [2019] calls *dismissive incomprehension*), can be deliberately misinterpreted, obscuring their intended meaning (McKinney 2015: 78–80, 104–5), and they can be appropriated, shifting their meaning to fit within the ideology of the hegemonic conceptual scheme. For example, a speaker who uses the idea of structural racism to articulate the harms of a health system might be dismissed via the profession of ignorance ('I don't know what *structural* racism is?'), via misinterpretation ('so you mean that the people who *established* the system were racist?'), or via semantic drift (for example shifting 'structural racism' towards a meaning that is associated with widespread implicit bias).

One recurrent strategy employed by the hostile parties is to appropriate the non-standard terms which the marginalised use to articulate their experiences. In recent years, we have seen more or less successful projects of appropriation focused on terms like 'woke' (Romano 2020), 'racism' (Engelhardt and Campbell 2019), 'emotional labour' (Horgan 2021), and as we saw in the introduction, 'cancelled'. In each of these cases, the result is to establish an understanding of the

term which replaces the meaning used by marginalised people, blocking them from successfully making certain claims in public discourse, and often undermining their credibility and standing in public discourse.

In some cases, problematic antagonism is obfuscated by sympathy, which may be genuine and well-meaning. Some members of dominant groups are critical of privileges and injustice in society, but implicitly perpetuate such injustice by claiming to know more about the minority than the minority itself. They are “lovingly, knowingly ignorant” agents who use the minority for their own interests and ignore the minority experiences (Ortega 2006). These agents are implicitly committed to a colonialist communicative attitude (Lugones 1987; Berenstain 2016), which treats the ideas and concepts of marginalised groups as a new resource to be enclosed and appropriated by privileged groups.

Effective listening on topics about the experiences of marginalised people requires not just the thin kind of co-operation involved in any conversation, but a kind of intellectual openness to getting things wrong, to recognising the extent of one’s own ignorance, and to fairly radical conceptual shifts. In this section, we have argued that features of actually existing public discourse—the perceived high social costs of speech, unequal distributions of epistemic labour, and communicative antagonism—undermine each of these preconditions of effective listening.

## 2. The Public Sphere Tradition

In Section 1, we motivated the need for receptive publics by focusing on the epistemic dynamics which are associated with the reception of counterhegemonic ideas. In this section, we switch from barriers to listening within individual dynamics to consider the institutional problems of public discourse, introducing some central ideas from the public sphere tradition. After introducing the idea of a public sphere, we will present Nancy Fraser’s case for counterpublics as an argument that structural epistemic oppression creates the need for specialised spaces for the articulation and dissemination of counterhegemonic knowledge, and extend her argument by suggesting that the listening problem creates the need for receptive spaces in which counterhegemonic ideas can be appropriately given uptake, and people can develop their receptive skills.

The reader might wonder why we are framing our discussion around Habermas, rather than the liberal epistemic democracy tradition in analytic political philosophy (see Anderson 2006; Estlund 2008; Landemore 2012; 2020). Two reasons. First, we are interested in building theoretical bridges between social epistemology and media studies, and Habermas’s and Fraser’s work are central to lots of research in media studies. Second, we see both theorists as

part of a tradition of radical epistemic democracy, which posits epistemic ideals for democratic society, whilst reckoning with the full extent to which actually existing societies fall short of those ideals. Given our interest in theorising online discourse, which takes place on platforms which are organised around profit rather than the collective epistemic good, and are owned by transnational corporations which have limited accountability to democratic institutions, we shall need tools for theorising situations which fall far short of the epistemic ideal.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1. *The Habermasian Public Sphere*

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Jürgen Habermas argues that the development of the bourgeois public sphere in the seventeenth century is one of the distinctive achievements of modernity. By opening up a space for large-scale political discourse outside of representative institutions, which brackets social power and hierarchies and is open to all (at least in principle), forums including coffee houses, salons, drinking societies created an opening for political power to be made accountable to public opinion.

What is a public sphere? There are several overlapping senses of the public/private distinction (Herzog 2013: 89–94; Anderson 2017: 43). When we say that an issue is private for some individual or group, we might mean one or more of the following: i) that they have a right to prevent others from knowing about this issue, ii) that they have a right to exclude others' interests from deliberations about this issue, iii) that they are not accountable to others for decisions they make about this issue, and iv) that they have a right to exclude others from decision-making about this issue. When we say that an issue is public for some individual or group (typically this group being all of the denizens of a particular state), we might mean one or more of the following: i) that they have a right to know about that issue, ii) that they have a right for their interests to be brought to bear about this issue, iii) that decisions made about this issue are (or ought to be) accountable to this group, and iv) that they have a right to be included in deliberation about this issue.<sup>7</sup>

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6. The epistemic ideal of the public spheres is a contested question. Is it the advancement of true beliefs or knowledge? Or of objectivity? Or epistemic virtues? Or other epistemic goods? We cannot address this question here. But the role receptive publics in the public sphere may indicate that the traditional epistemic ideals and related goods—such as objectivity and truth—are not the only relevant ideals for the public sphere.

7. A couple of finicky points. These distinctions come apart, meaning that some issues will be public in some senses but private in others. These distinctions are not exclusive, leaving some issues neither within the public or private sphere. For example, some issues fall neither within the scope of a right to ignorance, nor the scope of a right to know.

For Habermas, the public sphere is a collective enterprise, open to all, that involves the application of public reason to address issues of common concern. To keep these ideas in mind, we will think about a public sphere as a group of people with a particular set of political functions (Fraser 1990: 57). Here is a pocket definition:

*A public sphere is a group of people who have come together outside of the auspices of the state in order to discuss matters of public concern on an equal footing, and which functions to generate political legitimacy.*

The notion of a public sphere involves the discussion of topics of public interest (sense ii of publicity), the establishment of mechanisms by which the state is held accountable to the people (sense iii of publicity), and an in-principle right for anyone to participate in discussion on an equal footing (sense iv of publicity). Let's unpack each of these features of the public in turn.

A public sphere is organised around a set of topics of 'common concern' or 'public interest', which is to be contrasted with issues which are private or economic.<sup>8</sup> We might think about these topics as setting the interrogative agenda for public discourse, much as questions under discussion set the agenda for a private conversation (Roberts 1996). Historically, the development of the bourgeois public sphere was connected to the development of *question discourse* from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century (Case 2018). In this discursive style, packaging something up as a *question, issue, or problem* was a rhetorical tool to present it as relevant to public debate, and as potentially solvable by the exercise of public reason. Through this period, 'the X question' locution was ubiquitous; Case discusses a cornucopia of questions, including *the Social Question, the American Question, the Woman Question, the Race Question, the Eastern question, and the Oyster question* (Case 2018).

For Habermas, the public sphere is central to the legitimacy of deliberative democracy, both in the sense that it generates political legitimacy for a government through citizen participation, and in the sense that it subjects the actions of the state to public reason. Although it serves a political function, a public sphere is distinct from the institutions of the state. The public sphere generates legitimacy via the exercise of reason, not via the act of political representation. The idea is that a public sphere can generate political legitimacy through the 'unforced force' of argument, without the need to resort to violence, coercion, or the exercise of economic power. We set these ideas about political accountability aside and will think about the public sphere as a knowledge-generating institution.

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8. What makes an issue of common concern is often a matter of contestation (Fraser 1990: 73).

One of the reasons Habermas highlights coffee houses, salons, and beer halls is that they were—at least in principle—forums that were open to everyone. Of course, hanging out in the coffee house requires money and leisure time, and Habermas acknowledges the more general point that the bourgeois public sphere which emerged in the seventeenth century presupposed the economic independence of the mercantile family. However, this intermingling of the economic and public sphere is to the detriment of the latter. Part of Habermas' critique of the effects of mass communication on the public sphere through the twentieth century is that it allowed economic incentives to constrain and distort discourse, transforming economic conditions (property, an education) from a condition of entry to the public sphere into an organising principle for discourse (Habermas 1989: C V–VI).<sup>9</sup> Much like in the hypothetical veil of ignorance, social identities and relations of power are supposed to be bracketed in the public sphere, putting everyone on an even footing. The goal is for social hierarchies to be replaced by relations of communication, and the joint project of reaching properly justified consensus. Habermas recognises that the historical bourgeois public sphere excluded women and the working class (Habermas 1989: 83–85, 101, 118), but he takes these exclusions to be incidental departures from the constitutive ideals of these spheres.

The phrase 'the public sphere' is functional term, meaning that for both Habermas and later writers the phrase vacillates between descriptive, ideal, and historical senses. The sentence 'the public sphere is open to all' could be making three distinct claims:

- i) *Descriptive sense*: every group which has the relevant functional properties is in fact open to all.
- ii) *Ideal sense*: a group which fully realised the relevant functional properties would be open to all.
- iii) *Historical sense*: a historically and geographically specified group with the relevant functional properties (perhaps people who frequented English Coffee houses) was open to all.

It is hardly news that an object can have a functional property without perfectly realising that function. A teapot has the functional property of pouring tea, but many actual teapots have poorly designed spouts, leading to wet tablecloths. We distinguish between *a* public sphere (descriptive sense), *the ideal* public sphere (ideal sense), and adjectivally delimited public spheres (such as *the English pub-*

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9. Habermas's recent contribution on the effects of 'new media' on the public sphere do discuss some of the problems of these new structural transformations (2021). Yet, he does not address the issues of listening that have led us to introduce 'receptive publics.'

lic sphere, *the bourgeois* public sphere, and *the 17<sup>th</sup> century* public sphere) (historical sense). In what follows, we will use ‘public sphere’ to refer to the descriptive sense ‘[adjective] public’ to refer to the historical sense, and ‘ideal public sphere’ to refer to the ideal sense.

The ambiguity between the descriptive, normative and historical notions of a public sphere leads to two common confusions.

Some writers have suggested that the functional properties of the public sphere are not perfectly realised by actually existing public spheres means that there are no public spheres in contemporary societies (see Fenton 2018). Contra Aristotle, an object can have functional properties which are realised imperfectly. A teapot that pours badly is still a (bad) teapot. Similarly, an imperfect public sphere which excludes some groups or has been captured by commercial interests is still a public sphere in the descriptive sense. In fact, the functional properties of this group will be important to critiquing it.

Others appear to suggest that any group which has these functional properties will realise them perfectly. The mere fact that people are talking about issues of public concern on an online chatroom does not mean that people in the relevant group can equitably communicate and generate political legitimacy (see Geiger 2009). When we are operating with thick normative terms for political structures, we shouldn’t fall into the characteristic intellectual vice of ideal theory: reading features of our ideals back onto the models we use to describe reality (see Mills 2005).

## 2.2. Fraser on Counterpublics

In “Rethinking the Public Sphere”, Nancy Fraser argues that in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas falls afoul of the distinction between the actual and ideal public sphere, making the error of confusing the ideal with the actual in ways that distort his views of both.

On the descriptive side, Fraser argues Habermas failed to take full account of how actually existing public spheres have excluded people from marginalised groups. Despite its egalitarian aspirations, historical public spheres have involved material requirements which exclude subordinated groups (Fraser 1990: 64–65), and favour styles of discourse which benefit men (Fraser 1990: 63–64).<sup>10</sup> Fraser also points out that an artificially narrowed notion of ‘the public’ has allowed certain issues to be dismissed as irrelevant—including ‘domestic’ issues, and issues pertaining to the ownership of property—while placing oth-

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10. Fraser cites Landes on the construction of the French public sphere as a masculine-coded space (Landes 1988), and Eley on the way that the English and German public spheres developed out of male civil society organisations (Eley 1992).

ers at the centre of public discourse (Fraser 1990: 70–73). Anticipating Fricker’s discussion of hermeneutic gaps (Fricker 2007: C7), Fraser observes that actually existing public spheres tend to lack commonly used terms to articulate the concerns of marginalised groups (Fraser 1990: 67). Fraser doesn’t make the point in this way, but picking up on the work of later feminist epistemologists, we might say that her point is that in unequal societies, public spheres will be structurally epistemically oppressive (Dotson 2014), in the sense that they constrain and undermine the agency of marginalised social groups.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence of his idealised view of the public sphere, Habermas fails to recognise the existence of alternative discursive spaces, such as the counter-civil society created by American women in the nineteenth century (Ryan 1992).<sup>12</sup> Fraser calls these groups *subaltern counterpublics*, picking up on Spivak’s (1988) discussion of subaltern discourse, and Felski’s (1989) notion of a counterpublic. Fraser argues that Habermas’s failure to fully problematise bourgeois exclusion means that his view is not only descriptively inadequate as a description of historical public spheres, it means that his view of the ideal public sphere is inappropriate (Fraser 1990: 58). Whereas Habermas’s ideal is a single unified public sphere<sup>13</sup> Fraser argues that in modern stratified societies characterised by exclusionary public spheres, the appropriate ideal for public discourse is not unification, but a network of connected publics (Fraser 1990: 66).<sup>14</sup> We will understand a counterpublic to be a group with a set of functional properties which are complementary to those of a public sphere. Here’s a pocket definition:

*A counterpublic sphere is a group composed of people with marginalised identities gathered for the purposes of discussing matters of shared concern, with the*

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11. Habermas is hardly blind to the difference between the ideal and the reality of the public sphere (for example, see his discussion of Marx on the ideological function of the public sphere [Habermas 1989: 122–29]). Fraser’s point is that he has failed to consistently track the non-ideal aspects of the actual public sphere.

12. The exception is a passing reference to plebian public spheres in the preface (Habermas 1989: xviii). In later work, Habermas seems to acknowledge the importance of pluralism in the public sphere (Habermas 1992; 1996).

13. Into the 2000s, Habermas continues to take this line. He argues that the kinds of pluralism fostered by internet media is a serious threat to the functioning of the public sphere (Downey & Fenton 2003; Habermas 2006; Geiger 2009; Habermas 2021). He does occasionally recognise the importance of private spaces for the operation of the public sphere. His discussion of the literary sphere (1989: 43–51) shows how non-public spaces can support the public sphere, and in the final pages of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he suggests that under the democratic welfare state, the only way to re-establish a public sphere is via *intraorganizational* public spheres (1989: 247–50).

14. Are counterpublics only an intermediary ideal for unequal societies on the way towards an equal society with a truly open public sphere? Fraser suggests that the identity-forming functions of counterpublics for minority groups mean that they will retain a role in egalitarian societies (Fraser 1990: 68–69).

*function of producing counterdiscourses which will influence the public sphere, and of ameliorating their marginalisation in the public sphere.* (Fraser 1990: 66–67; Squires 2002)

Unlike public spheres, counterpublic groups are not fully public. Although counterpublic groups discuss issues of shared concern (which may not yet be recognised as such by the wider public), and contribute to the state being accountable to the citizenry, participation is typically restricted to a particular marginalised group. Counterpublic spaces will tend to be grow up around socially segregated spaces, such as women-only voluntary organisations (Ryan 1992), Black churches (Dawson 1995), and Black barbershops (Harris-Lacewell 2004).

As with ‘public sphere’, the term ‘counterpublic’ vacillates between descriptive, ideal, and historical senses (Fraser 1990: 67). We can distinguish between *a counterpublic sphere* (descriptive sense), *the ideal counterpublic sphere* (ideal sense)<sup>15</sup>, and various adjectivally specified counterpublics (historical sense). Here we might think of *Black counterpublics* (Squires 2002; Graham & Smith 2016), *feminist counterpublics* (Travers 2003; Trott 2020), *trans counterpublics* (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles 2018), and *disability counterpublics* (Chin 2018). These adjectivally specific counterpublics are a useful shorthand, but we should remember that intersections of social identity (and of oppressions) mean that counterpublics will often, and should, discuss the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. Feminist counterpublics ought to discuss how gendered oppression affects, for example Black, trans, indigenous, disabled, immigrant, and working class women. In what follows, we will use ‘counterpublic’ to refer to the descriptive sense ‘[adjective] counterpublic’ to refer to the historical sense, and ‘ideal counterpublic’ to refer to the ideal sense.

The two functions of counterpublic groups—developing counterdiscourses, and influencing the public sphere—mean that counterpublics have what Fraser calls a ‘dual character’ (Fraser 1990: 68). One or the other of these functions might be realised at different times, or to different degrees. In *Rethinking the Black Public Sphere*, Catherine Squires extends this idea, using the history of African American political organising to distinguish three kinds of political spaces. She argues in the antebellum United States, African Americans cultivated *enclave* spaces, which focused on providing respite and developing conceptual resources (Squires 2002: 457–59), whereas during the Civil rights era Black organised true counterpublics organised around the aim of influencing the public sphere (2002: 459–63), and the Nation of Islam and other separatist groups function as *satellite*

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15. Perhaps it would be better to talk about *good* counterpublics, since they are reactions to a non-ideal situation.



publics which are deliberately isolated to maintain a distinctive group identity (2002: 463–64) (see footnote 11).

Not every group that presents itself as a counterpublic is one. In a political environment in which claiming a marginalised identity can generate traction in public discourse, there will be an opportunity for disingenuous members of privileged groups to gain discursive power by presenting themselves as having a marginalised identity. A perennial strategy of right-wing intellectuals is to present a dominant group as having a marginalised identity in order to consolidate hegemonic ideas. For example, the idea white men are disproportionately exposed to certain kinds of harms—such as social isolation, greater risk of suicide, or the harms inherent in serving in the military—is often used to motivate the idea that white masculinity is an oppressed identity. Engelhardt and Campbell (2019) call this strategy *false double consciousness*, highlighting the fact that it deploys the idea that there is a secret counter-hegemonic narrative about the oppression of a group which is in fact dominant, which can only be accessed by members of the dominant group.

We will think of groups which purport to play the role of counterpublics but systematically fail to do so as *false counterpublics*. False counterpublics are groups which present themselves as counterpublics, but are either i) not composed of members of an oppressed group, or ii) are non-accidentally failing to produce counterhegemonic discourses. What counts as an oppressed or dominant group is a complicated question, which may depend partly on the purposes of our theorising (see Jenkins 2023: C3), and exactly what counts as counterhegemonic discourse will be similarly complex. Giving an account of oppression and counterhegemonic discourse is beyond the scope of this paper, but investigating the workings of false counterpublics, as well as the ways in which true counterpublics can fall short of their goals (Fraser 1990: 67) is an important direction for future inquiry.

We believe that the important takeaway from Fraser's critique of Habermas is that in actual circumstances, in which the public sphere is characterised by substantive material and epistemic oppression, the unified public sphere is not an appropriate ideal for political discourse. In fact, the pursuit of the ideal of discursive unification can compound social inequality whilst masking it via appeal to the ideal of public reason. In actual societies characterised by multiple intersecting dimensions of oppression, the friend of epistemic democracy ought to be aiming to support counterpublics, rather than doubling down on the ideal of the unified public sphere.

We contend that just as counterpublics emerge because of a difficulty in producing counterdiscourses in epistemically oppressive public spheres, receptive publics emerge because of difficulties that public spheres have in listening to and processing counterdiscourses from counterpublic spheres. The worries and dis-

puts about so-called ‘cancel culture’ that we mentioned in the introduction are one shape that those difficulties can take. In unequal societies, equitable political discourse requires both institutions for nurturing and publicising counterdiscourses, and partner institutions for improving receptive skills and fostering the uptake of counterdiscourses.

Let’s close this section by summarising the core features of the different kinds of public spaces (anticipating our discussion of receptive publics in the next section a little).

	<i>Membership</i>	<i>Functions</i>
<i>Public sphere</i>	Group of all kinds of people gathered to	i) discuss matters of common concern, ii) generate political legitimacy.
<i>Counterpublic</i>	Group of marginalised people gathered to	i) generate counterdiscourses, (enclaves), ii) influence the public sphere (counterpublics), iii) maintain distinctive minority identities (satellites).
<i>Receptive public</i>	Group of people (with both marginalised and dominant identities), gathered to	i) improve receptive skills, ii) receive or take up counterdiscourses.

### 3. Receptive Publics

Although the notion of a counterpublic is a useful critical tool for thinking about public discourse, we have argued that it doesn’t address all of the problems faced by saliently oppressed speakers in public discourse. As groups which have previously been enclaves take on an oppositional counterpublic role in the public sphere, and some marginal counterpublics even become part of the public sphere, debate is characterised by increased epistemic friction. This friction causes problems for both those who experience salient oppression and those who don’t: creating barriers to the uptake of the former’s ideas, and creating anxiety for the latter. In other words, the listening problem is pressing for members of both groups. Receptive publics are an institutional solution to this problem. If counterpublics function to generate counterdiscourses, and to influence the wider public sphere, receptive publics function to give a suitable space for the reception of counterdiscourses, and to allow citizens to develop the skills needed to give uptake to counterhegemonic ideas. They serve this function by offering an environment with favourable conditions for learning about counterhegemonic ideas, which reduces the burden on the individuals within them. In this section, our goal is to fill in the sketch of what receptive publics are, and to explain how they can address the three barriers we’ve identified as contributing to the listening problem.

### 3.1. Defining Receptive Publics

Let's start with a pocket definition of a receptive public:

A receptive public is a group of people with varying experiences of oppression who gather to discuss counterhegemonic ideas produced within counterpublics, with the intention that a subset of the group can i) learn about forms of oppression that they don't experience, and ii) develop the skills needed to listen to and understand counterhegemonic ideas.

Receptive publics aim to combine the egalitarian aspirations of the Habermasian public sphere with the recognition of epistemic asymmetry which is central to counterpublics. Olúfémi Táíwò (2020) argues that a proper appreciation of standpoint epistemology requires not just deference, but a commitment to building new epistemic institutions—to build new rooms—and we see receptive publics as consonant with this project. Participation in receptive publics should be guided by social status, such that those with experience of the salient form(s) of oppression (and particularly those who have participated in relevant counterpublics) take priority as *speakers*, whilst those who lack this relevant experience default to the role of *listener*. And participants collectively need to recognise the structural and individual barriers to the latter listening to the former. This is not to say that listeners are passive or uncritical: receptive contributions can be active and may involve asking questions or sharing their experiences, but receptive publics differ from the main public sphere in that contributions from those who aren't saliently-oppressed are not centred. The proper attitude to adopt within them is critical open-mindedness (see, e.g., Riggs 2010).<sup>16</sup>

As with public spheres and counterpublics, we ought to distinguish between actual receptive publics, the ideal receptive public, and particular receptive publics. To reiterate, actual receptive publics will depart (often considerably) from the ideal. Particular receptive publics might be distinguished by the listening group (the liberal feminist receptive public), or by the group being listened to (the anti-imperialist receptive public).

Not every group which claims to be a receptive public is one. There are two kinds of false receptive public: groups which are focused on receiving ideas

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16. The inner workings of receptive publics can also be developed in the context of theories that spell out how objectivity is produced in groups. For example, Helen Longino's list of four features necessary for objectivity could be fruitful: public venues (2002: 129), uptake of criticism (2002: 129f.), public standards for assessing evidence (2002: 130f.), and "tempered equality" of the authority of the participants (2002: 131) contribute to objectivity. In particular, Longino observes that uptake of criticism requires that the person criticized must consider the criticism, and the person expressing criticism must also include relevant rejections of their criticism into their considerations. Criticism is a bilateral process, not a one-way road.

from false counterpublics, and groups which are oriented around genuine counterpublics, but are systematically failing to learn about counterhegemonic ideas or to develop listening skills. A group of white women which is focused on understanding the supposedly oppressed perspective of white men would be a false counterpublic in the first sense, and a group of white men who claim to be working through feminist perspectives whilst they are in reality developing a men's rights framework (see footnote 4) would be a false receptive public in the second sense. We don't mean to suggest that any group which departs from the receptive ideal should be labelled a false counterpublic: a false counterpublic is a fake or counterfeit (Fallis & Mathieson 2019), in the sense that it claims to be performing various receptive functions for counterpublics, which it is systematically not performing.

Building on Fraser's discussion of issues of public concern, we note that the topics of discussion for a receptive public will not be easily specifiable in advance, and will often not fit neatly into hegemonic notions of issues of public concern. Like the public sphere, receptive publics operate outwith the auspices of representative governance. Government consultations are not receptive publics, especially not if the topic and timeframe are set without the consulted oppressed group. Similarly, attempts at receptive publics which are oriented around the questions of those who don't experience the salient form(s) of oppression will be less than ideal.

Whereas counterpublics function as spaces for people who experience (a) shared form(s) of oppression to build epistemic and political solidarity, receptive publics function as spaces for people who don't experience a particular form of oppression to learn about the experiences of those who do, and to increase their capacity to listen. This capacity is of course important within counterpublics too. What is distinctive about receptive publics is that this receptive function is their primary goal, including people who don't experience the salient form(s) of oppression as a proper part of the group. As a shorthand, we can think about receptive publics as composed of saliently oppressed people who bring their experiences, and people who don't experience the salient form(s) of oppression who bring their ignorance and capacity to listen. The members of receptive publics do not have to have the same opinion coming in—people who aren't saliently oppressed may join to listen because of political solidarity, curiosity, or just interest. They also do not have to turn into active allies for saliently oppressed people and may simply accept the experiences shared in the receptive public as knowledge. Receptive publics aim at elevating the value of experiences by providing structures for listening to and uptaking experiences.<sup>17</sup>

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17. This fits with the aim of "valoriz[ing] subjective experience" (Longino 1987: 59) which is central to feminist research.

Much as counterpublics have a dual character, receptive publics may highlight one or other of their functions. Some may focus on signal-boosting ideas from counterpublic groups, whilst others focus on carefully working through counterhegemonic ideas with an eye to inculcating listening skills. We distinguish between *amplificatory receptive publics* which focus primarily on the receptive function, and *developmental receptive publics*, which focus primarily on the educational function. As we will think about it, good listening to counterhegemonic ideas is an acquired skill, involving the transition from explicit thought to automatic performance distinctive of practical skill (see Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1980 for an influential approach), and developmental receptive publics offer an environment for the development of that skill. By contrast, amplificatory receptive publics address the barriers which counterhegemonic ideas face in actually getting heard.

Unlike counterpublics, receptive publics are not central to the formation of oppressed identities. They may, however, play a role in determining the identity of people who don't experience the salient form of oppression. Receptive publics may help participants to conceptualise themselves as open-minded and critical members of the public sphere, as well as to develop novel and non-oppressive conceptualisations of their privileged identities (for discussion of related ideas, see Alcoff 2015 on whiteness, and Almassi 2015 on masculinity).<sup>18</sup> Importantly, membership of a receptive public does *not* entail membership of counterpublics which the group listens to, and things will have gone wrong if non-saliently oppressed members of a receptive public think of themselves as saliently oppressed due to their membership of a particular receptive public.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.2. Two Receptive Publics

To sharpen our understanding, let's consider two examples of receptive publics: the feminist podcast *The Guilty Feminist*, and discussions about the oppression of Uighyr people on the app *Clubhouse* which took place in 2021. We will highlight both negative and positive features of these groups, but our primary intention is not to critique them, but to test out the usefulness of the notion of a receptive public against real-life examples as both a descriptive and normative tool.

The *Guilty Feminist* podcast is a British feminist comedy podcast, started in 2015 by Sofie Hagen and Deborah Frances-White. The podcast combines stand-

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18. The identity-forming role of the public sphere is discussed by Habermas in several places, notably in his argument that the construction of people as *consumers* (rather than citizens) undermines the functioning of the public sphere (Habermas 1989: 159–75).

19. This seems to be precisely what happened with some Men's Liberation groups (Messner 1998).

up routines from a rotating group of female and non-binary comedians with panel-style discussions on a wide range of topics (recent episodes include ‘getting comfortable with being uncomfortable’, ‘being seen and being heard’, and ‘getting on with the job’). At the time of writing the show has over 90 million downloads,<sup>20</sup> and has launched several spin-off shows.

As a form of media, podcasting has some distinctive features: it has relatively low barriers to entry, opens up space for producers to find small audiences, and fosters a distinctive kind of intimacy, in part due to its status as a headphone medium (see Crofts et al 2005; Spinelli & Dann 2019 on the features of podcasts).<sup>21</sup> This combination of features means that podcasting is well-suited to the development of counterpublic spaces (see Florini 2015; Vrikki & Malik 2019 on anti-racist and subaltern podcasts). We suggest that this combination of features also makes podcasting well-suited to developing community spaces for listening.

Although the Guilty Feminist started as a straightforward counterpublic for a (relatively privileged) subset of (mostly) women, with shows focused on articulating mainly cis, white feminist concerns and contesting mainly cis, white female identity, over time it has developed a more educative function, with shows focusing on issues faced by other groups (for example ‘LGBTQI people in Ukraine’, ‘Emergency Episode for the crisis in Afghanistan’, and ‘Hidden inequalities’). The ‘Minefields’ episode<sup>22</sup> provides a particularly self-conscious example of the podcast functioning as a receptive public. This episode focused on discussions around female genital mutilation and trans liberation (both extremely contentious topics in the UK). In the framing discussion and comedy routine, Frances-White focused on the anxieties around making and dealing with mistakes in discussions about oppression, acknowledging the high social costs which can prevent people from engaging in conversations about oppression that they don’t experience. Francis-White started the discussion of these topics with a vow not to post any comments about the conversation on twitter (inter alia), in an effort to ensure that the discussion took place with some level of privacy. Whereas other episodes function as release valves for frustrations, or to proselytise action on feminist causes, this episode presents an example of a group of people attempting to listen to and work through difficult and unfamiliar ideas about oppression that many of them do not experience.

This episode is a valuable attempt to use podcasting to support a receptive public, including both the physical audience for the recording, and the wider

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20. <https://medium.com/acast/the-guilty-feminist-joins-the-acast-creator-network-7b9ce1f-62cbb>.

21. At the same time, podcasting is often algorithmically mediated, commercially funded, and can require intense self-promotion to reach one’s audience, creating dilemmas for podcasters who are interested in creating community spaces for minority groups (Vrikki & Malik 2019).

22. <https://guiltyfeminist.com/episode/?episode=93>.

group of listeners. It does have its problems, however. The podcast started with the question “Why can’t I say this in public without facing a backlash?”, and a story about a trans woman engaging in (supererogatory) efforts to help Frances-White (a cis woman) understand the politics of trans media representation. Although this is a useful framing for the podcast’s assumed white, cis, middle-class audience, the discussion struggled to move beyond this framing to centre the concerns and issues of the saliently-oppressed groups being discussed. This highlights a structural problem for receptive publics: if they are initiated by people who don’t experience the salient form of oppression, they need to find a way to overcome the barriers which the listening problem presents to that group (i.e., the high social costs discussed in 1.1), to understand the ways in which it constrains the communication of the saliently oppressed group (including the issues raised in 1.2).

Another structural problem that receptive publics, counterpublics and, in general, all groups face lies in the plural identities and heterogeneity of the members. Every member of these publics is an individual with particular identities and characteristics and therefore subgroups within groups can develop. These differences and subgroups can lead to dynamics of oppression and marginalization within saliently marginalized groups. For example, Frances-White and other white cis-women can be saliently marginalized within a patriarchal society, but within the group of ‘women’ they can also contribute to marginalizing trans\* women, non-binary people, or non-white cis-women. Lugones describes how within oppressed groups those with a more “solid identity” (Lugones 2003: 152) that is not mixed or “impure” in some way may oppress those who have less solid identities. She is writing these thoughts for, “green-eyed Blacks, never-been-taught-my-culture Asian Americans and U.S. Latinos, emigres, immigrants and migrants, mixed-bloods and mixed cultures, solid core, community bred, folk of color” (Lugones 2003: 151)—individuals who do not fit the expectations by white people and non-white people who have “internalized whiteness [and] desperately want boundary lines [to be] marked out” as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it (1990: 143, in Lugones 2003: 162f.).<sup>23</sup> They are subject to vertical oppression and horizontal oppression. Such groups of saliently oppressed individuals may themselves need receptive publics for developing solidarity.

Our second example of a receptive public is Clubhouse, an audio-only social media site, started in 2019. It had a meteoric rise in popularity during the early stages of the pandemic, reaching a peak of 10 million downloads, although it has seen a recent dip in active users.<sup>24</sup> The site is organised around ‘rooms’,

23. Mills (2007) also notes that white ignorance is not limited to white people, but can be acquired and maintained by non-white people, too.

24. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/09/clubhouse-co-founder-opens-up-on-growing-pains-over-last-18-months.html>.

with differing levels of privacy, which host real-time audio discussions between users. In each room, users are divided between those who are ‘on stage’ (and can speak), and those who are in the ‘audience’ (and can only listen). Discussions are ephemeral, and there is no facility for users to record discussions. Black users have had a central role in popularising this app (Nelson 2021), due to a combination of Black celebrities who were early adopters, and the relative ease of using the app to host private discussions among marginalised people. This should come as no surprise given the history of African American netizens using new software to suit their purposes (see McIlwain 2020).

Given its ephemeral discussions, and central distinction between speakers and audience, clubhouse is particularly well-suited for hosting receptive publics. One striking example that has received media coverage is the Chinese-speaking room called “There is a concentration camp in Xinjiang?” which ran during 2021. This room allowed Uighurs and Han Chinese to talk about the oppression of Uighur people in Xinxiang.<sup>25</sup> In an episode of *The New Yorker Politics and More* podcast, the journalist Jiayang Fan and user ‘Deedee’ (a pseudonym) discuss the conversations in the room. Deedee explains:

This is a very fleeting window to have the possibility to have thousands of people actually sit down and listen to Uighurs who actually live through this, who are still separated from their loved ones. And then that’s when the moderators start to step in and be proactive in terms of saying that we might have the opportunity to actually listen to people who experienced this. We want to amplify their voices. So, if you are battling denial or if you’re going through different phases of emotions, that’s your own homework, but do your best to listen and do your best to be respectful. (Wickenden 2021)<sup>26</sup>

Deedee relates how the room reacted when a Han Chinese woman questioned a Uighur woman’s story about her family experiencing hunger. “[T]he room just took a deep collective breath in, it’s like, ‘Why did you say that? Why would you say that?’” Deedee suggests that the room enabled a distinctive kind of intimacy and connection between speakers and the audience:

In Clubhouse, these people are speaking Mandarin. That person sound like your friend, your neighbor, you immediately recognize his North-western accent because he went to college with somebody from that re-

25. The Chinese government did eventually block access to Clubhouse from China, but, apparently, people were working together to help each other find ways to stay on Clubhouse.

26. See the episode transcript at (Wickenden 2021) and the audio at <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-new-yorker-politics-and-more/id268213039?i=1000517804097>.



gion. The distance closed up so quickly, you can almost feel like a lot of people are immediately drawn in. That connection is built at that moment. (Wickenden 2021)

Clubhouse was a particularly useful venue for discussions about Chinese politics, given the Chinese government's censorship of online discussion, and after a brief period that one journalist described as 'bingeing on free expression', access to the app was restricted from China.<sup>27</sup>

Deedee's description of this room brings out several of the distinctive features of receptive publics: a group of people gathered together for the purposes of listening to a group who experience oppression that they don't, the desire to amplify oppressed peoples' voices, active listening (exemplified by the collective intake of breath), and the kind of intimacy between speaker and audience that is required for close listening. The transformation of difference into closeness that Deedee describes is an important learning experience for acquiring the skill of good listening.

While some of the features of Clubhouse lend themselves to hosting receptive publics, it also has some important problems. The app's blocking feature allows users to unilaterally restrict what conversations others can participate in (as noted by Oremus 2021), and the difficulty in moderating live audio (and the app's refusal to hire paid moderators) has meant that the app hosts a huge amount of racist and misogynistic speech and misinformation (see Walk-Morris 2020; Lorenz 2021).<sup>28</sup> Although Clubhouse's popularity has waned, many other social media sites have cloned its functionality, meaning that if anything this mode of social media will become increasingly important.

### 3.3. *Addressing the Listening Problem*

With a better-developed picture of what a receptive public is, we can start to see how they provide an institutional space suitable for addressing the three barriers we've highlighted as contributing to the listening problem.

The first barrier is the perception of high social costs for speech, and resistance to epistemic friction, which preclude the kind of collaborative engagement involved in effective listening. The aim of a receptive public is not to minimise epistemic friction—for example by minimising discourse on contentious topics, or by aiming to ensure consensus—but rather to put epistemic friction to productive ends, and increase the benefits of engagement, such that social costs aren't

27. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/bingeing-free-expression-popularity-of-clubhouse-app-soars-in-china>.

28. On the social epistemology of content moderation, see Frost-Arnold (2023: C2).

the dominant consideration.<sup>29</sup> In an ideal receptive public, people who aren't saliently oppressed will be aware that their anxieties about communication are generated by the friction between hegemonic and counterhegemonic ideas, and will try to put that friction to work. They will focus on how their views contribute to friction, and will work back through their reasons and personal histories to try to understand its source. In this way, engaging with epistemic friction in a receptive public is both an exercise in second-person, but also in first-person understanding (cf. Medina 2012, on self-knowledge and knowledge of others). The subjects will aim to develop a kaleidoscopic consciousness "that can hold and maintain active multiple perspectives simultaneously" (Medina 2012; 74), and can include counterfactual perspectives. They will also be well-positioned to develop epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness, curiosity and epistemic humility (Medina 2012; Tanesini 2021), needed for virtuous listening.

The second barrier is the unequal distribution, and recognition, of epistemic labour. In many actually existing public spheres, one way that oppression manifests is in an expectation that oppressed people take on not only the work of expressing counterhegemonic ideas, but also the interpretative work of ensuring that those ideas are accessible to non-saliently oppressed groups, as well as shouldering the responsibility for working through their audience's misunderstandings and missteps. Although even an ideal receptive public cannot avoid the initial labour taken in expressing counterhegemonic ideas, they do aim to minimise the amount of interpretative labour required of saliently-oppressed groups by recognising that effective listening requires hard work. The ideal for listening in a receptive public—and plausibly more generally, see Notess (2019)—is not a passive recipient of communication.<sup>30</sup> Good listening is not merely uptaking ideas regardless of plausibility, comprehension, or degree of understanding. Responsible listening involves the exercise of agency, both mental and communicative: it involves emotionally processing unfamiliar ideas, and shifting one's conceptual framework to incorporate new concepts. Once we recognise that listening is not merely passive, we can start to think about what the ideal for effective interpretative work might be, and considering what kinds of interpretive skills receptive publics ought to inculcate.

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29. It's possible that already-existing receptive publics have contributed to (the perception of) cancel culture and a preoccupation with high social costs. Marginalised groups' criticisms of mainstream speech, actions, or structures, being amplified (and unwittingly distorted) by allies may be a factor in why (perceptions of) cancel culture are so widespread. (Though see also Daub [2022], who points to the economic interests involved.) But we think this indicates the need for more, and more accessible, receptive publics.

30. Notess emphasises that the ideal listener is "maximally engaged, devoting higher levels of her own cognitive resources to the processing of speakers' messages in order to achieve justice" (2019: 640). On this conception of listening the epistemic labour in communicative exchanges is more evenly distributed between speaker and listener.

The third barrier is the antagonistic relationship between dominant and oppressed groups, which often involves the former co-opting concepts that the latter develop within counterpublics.<sup>31</sup> Above, we have seen several examples in which concepts developed by counterpublic groups were distorted and repurposed either by an unwitting public sphere (for example ‘cancellation’), or malicious actors invested in delegitimising the counterpublic (for example ‘structural racism’). Such co-option takes away interpretative tools from counterpublic groups (giving rise to what Patricia Williams has called the “linguistic treadmill” [Williams 1995: 27] and Julia Serrano has called the “activist language merry-go-round” [Serrano 2014]), and twists the interpretation of speech which appeals to these concepts, making salient uncharitable, and perhaps incoherent interpretations of those speech acts. No single individual or group has authority over concepts—we need to negotiate the meaning of concepts so that all people’s interests are met—but one of the important skills required for being a responsible democratic citizen is the ability to understand how a novel concept is being used, and to flag up when a familiar term is being used in an unfamiliar way, and when a familiar concept is not being used because of problematic associations or inferences. Participants in an ideal receptive public take up this responsibility, by only using counterhegemonic concepts when they are sufficiently confident of their original use that they can deploy them with minimal necessary changes. One of the benefits of a receptive public using a concept that originated in a counterpublic is that receptive publics can provide a kind of referential anchor, which can help counteract efforts to co-opt a term or to pursue the strategy of dismissive incomprehension. This helps to provide a counterweight to both co-option and semantic drift.

This is just one example of how a receptive public might commit to putting in the work of understanding ideas that run against received wisdom, and working through unfamiliar conceptual schemes. There will be others. But generally, by providing an audience which is willing to put in interpretative work, a receptive public opens up space for a counterpublic to pursue strategies of communication that do not assume a basic level of hostility, allowing them to share ideas that would otherwise struggle to get traction in the main public sphere.

Successful receptivity is not reducible to merely having a heightened awareness of non-dominant perspectives and concepts. It also involves being involved in social change by listening virtuously and giving uptake to non-dominant con-

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31. Some political theorists have suggested that certain kinds of conflict are a positive feature of democratic discourse. Chantal Mouffe has argued that deliberative democracy should endorse agonistic conflict, i.e. conflict that turns antagonistic enemies into agonistic adversaries and provides “legitimate political channels for dissenting voices” (Mouffe 2005: 21) Receptive publics acknowledge that political channels are necessary, but they recognize that the channels and spaces must be constructed and maintained in ways that avoid harmful agonism.

tributions. At the same time, successful receptivity is also not reducible to the individual level, to one or two individuals listening virtuously outwith supporting institutions and practices. The audience in receptive publics is a group of people, not just individuals. And the goal of receptive publics is structural and social change, not merely individual change.

This set-up also takes away from the burden on individual participants in receptive publics: it is not upon them to solve all issues on their hand, it is the task of collectives. As the number of participants in receptive publics increases, the demands on every individual reduce.

Karen Frost-Arnold (2023: C5) argues that individuals who *lurk* in counterpublic spaces may be able to gain similar benefits to participants in receptive publics, generating beneficial epistemic friction, and world-travelling, without making undue demands of marginalised speakers. Frost-Arnold also highlights the fact that lurking involves tendencies to instrumentalise marginalised knowers, to generate loving, knowing, ignorance (as identified in many white feminists by Ortega 2006), to cultivate cowardice, and to generate an unwarranted sense of entitlement to counterpublic spaces (Sullivan 2006). We see our approach in this paper as complementary to Frost-Arnold's proposal to avoid these problems by developing intellectual virtues. Although Receptive Publics do make demands of the labour of non-dominant speakers, they create a space in which people from both dominant and non-dominant groups can engage *collaboratively* on issues of concern to the non-dominant group, whilst maintaining counterpublic spaces as distinctive spaces for non-dominant groups. Although many Receptive Publics will fall short of this ideal, in the good case dominant speakers will be held accountable for their contributions, whilst engaging in genuine world-travelling.

#### 4. How to Build a Receptive Public

Oppressed people have always found ways to gather to resist their oppression—including hermeneutical oppression—establishing mini-publics within barber-shops, churches, and inside people's houses. We're not sure that it would be desirable or effective for the institutions of the public sphere to try to support the development of these spheres, although they certainly shouldn't undermine them. But societies which claim, or aspire, to be democratic do need to make the tools available for marginalised and non-marginalised people to work together to build receptive publics.

This is a complicated task. All communicative problems demand give and take between the different parties involved. If we're thinking about communication on a societal level then the number of parties, the entrenchment of existing

social dynamics, and the scale of the problem are all so much bigger, and so the challenge is even greater. Medina claims “we all share the collective responsibility to facilitate the hermeneutical agency of all communicators, especially if they have been marginalized”. But he also points out that “[i]nstitutions and people in a position of power bear special hermeneutical burdens” (Medina 2012: 109–10). In the contemporary public sphere this means thinking about the role of both marginalised and privileged individuals, of private companies such as social media platforms, and of governments and of regulatory bodies.

We don’t have a complete recipe for building a receptive public, but we have some preliminary suggestions.

A good first step would be for researchers (in social epistemology, critical theory, digital media studies and media history, to name just a few areas) to develop a more detailed theoretical understanding of historical, existing, and potential receptive publics. Our initial exploration sketches out the concept but doesn’t fully identify how and where receptive publics can be formed, what makes them work well, and what makes them fail. We’ve gestured towards this based on a combination of our own experiences and existing theoretical literature, but significantly more work is needed.

To ensure that we get a full picture, it’s important that this work comes from a variety of research backgrounds and methodologies, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative empirical data, as well as conceptual theorising. At that point, more practical, concrete steps can be taken. We don’t want to anticipate these in too much detail before the necessary empirical work is carried out. But we can imagine a variety of actions that *could* be taken at different levels of society.

There are some things individuals can do. Everyone could make an effort to not only make more reliable and justified contributions to public discourse, but also to develop skills for the reception and uptake of unfamiliar ideas. For example, people who don’t experience oppression on the basis of their race could make efforts to seek out discussions of racism, and—when it’s appropriate for them to participate at all—participate by listening, reflecting, and adjusting their beliefs and intentions in accordance with what they’ve learned. However, it is implausible—and certainly inefficient—to think that a sufficient number of individuals can and will do this sufficiently well without institutional support, so the role of institutions is crucial.

Social media platforms design the spaces in which much public discourse now occurs, and so they bear significant responsibility for ensuring that receptive publics can be formed, used, and managed. In the early 2000s, the first social media platforms that really took off (e.g., MySpace, launched in 2003, and Facebook, launched in 2004) sought primarily to connect people who already knew each other offline. As social media began to supplement news intake, this may

have decreased—or at least failed to broaden—many users' exposure to people with different backgrounds, experiences, and views to their own (Pew Research Centre 2018; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2021). This was not conducive to receptive publics, and in some cases is suspected to have created echo chambers and filter bubbles (see Jamieson & Capella 2008; Pariser 2011 on these terms).

More recently, social media platforms have given users the opportunity to connect with a wider—and potentially more diverse—user base, and this has proven extremely popular. Twitter, which makes users' posts public by default and encourages asymmetric connections (you can follow someone regardless of whether they choose to follow you back), had a boom in popularity in 2009. Facebook launched 'Groups'—which also encouraged connections between people who don't know one another in real life—in 2010. In 2020, Tiktok—whose central mechanic (the 'for you page') provides users with a constant stream of content, the majority of which is from users they do not follow—overtook Facebook as the most downloaded platform in the world.

This shift away from consolidating existing social connections towards contact with strangers offers more potential for the creation of receptive publics, as counterpublic groups come into contact both with one another, and with mainstream publics. In this way, Twitter, Facebook groups, and Tiktok have all played important roles in communication for oppressed groups. But it's important to remember that this communication is mediated by algorithms which replicate and amplify existing biases and preferences (see Noble 2018), and that the design choices are motivated by increasing market share or profits through ad revenue and the collection and sale of user data.

This means we shouldn't expect platforms to do what is best for users or for society, except coincidentally. And what is popular amongst users may already be changing again. There's some evidence that worldwide lockdown measures at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a shift away from 'big' social media, towards smaller, more private, online community spaces—like Discord, whose number of users increased by 47% between February and July of 2020 (Pierce 2020). The impending (apparent, if not guaranteed) downfall of Twitter seems to be further fuelling that trend, and increasing the popularity of 'federated' social media sites like Mastodon (Sinders 2022).

This may prove to be fertile ground for receptive publics, allowing communities to develop trust and intimacy which could support good listening—for example, by reducing fears about social costs, and disincentivising antagonism. But, equally, it could support polarisation and limit opportunities for amplification and engagement between people from different social backgrounds. Ultimately, we suspect a healthy public sphere will need a variety of spaces and tools to maximise engagement from, and discussion between, different groups.

And that the ideal balance is unlikely to emerge coincidentally through market competition between platforms, with no conscious thought given to the conditions required for productive public discourse.

So what's the alternative? We're hesitant about recommending direct state intervention in social media, which in some cases has actively undermined the creation of receptive publics (Chang Chien & Qin 2021). But there are government-level measures which could support receptive publics. First, we might consider the role of digital literacy programs. At the moment these tend to cover technical skills—like how to navigate websites and applications—and critical thinking skills—like how to judge whether a set of claims is true. But they could be expanded to include listening and community management skills informed by successful receptive publics, and also be made accessible to more demographics.<sup>32</sup> Secondly—and as developments like Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal and Elon Musk's purchasing of Twitter have made clear—we need to have serious conversations about private ownership of, and legislation for, social media.

For these suggestions to be effective, they will all—from undertaking empirical research on existing receptive publics, to developing new platform tools, planning education programmes, and formulating legislation—themselves require receptive practices. As much as possible they should be carried out by members of relevant oppressed groups, but group membership alone isn't sufficient for a detailed understanding of a wide variety of groups and their needs. The people best positioned for such roles will be those who are already embedded in communities which have good receptive practices, and who have gained understanding beyond their own experiences of oppression. Those who aren't embedded in such communities will need to be prepared to develop receptive skills in order to overcome the limitations of their own perspectives and this will require the establishment of adequate institutions. Otherwise, these suggestions risk making the kind of mistakes that we've identified above. To build institutions to address the listening problem, we must contend with it as we go along.

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32. Digital literacy has been fully integrated into education at all levels in Finland, and has led to it being described as the best-equipped nation in Europe to resist foreign interference online (OSF 2017; Lessenski 2019; Henley 2020).

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